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Populism in Spain: an analysis of Podemos

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Abstract This article analyses the causes of the loss of support suffered by Podemos in the elections held on 26 June 2016. In these elections, the party, led by Pablo Iglesias, ran for office in coalition with the United Left. The article describes the way the election developed for Podemos, analyses the shaping of its populist rhetoric in line with a radical left-wing view, discusses the social and political conditions that favoured its rise, and finally, notes that the disappearance of these conditions jeopardises its chances of success in the future.

Keywords Populism | Political parties | Spain | Left | Nationalism

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Introduction

The most recent general elections in Spain, which were held on 26 June, showed two clear trends. The first was a significant increase in votes for the People's Party (Partido Popular, PP) as compared to the results of the December 2015 elections, when the party was severely punished by the electorate. The second was the serious failure of the populist radical left, represented by Unidos Podemos (United We Can). This organisation emerged from the convergence of Podemos (We Can), led by Pablo Iglesias, and United Left (Izquierda Unida), the political branch of the Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España), led by Alberto Garzón.¹

The failure of Podemos has been electoral and political, quantitative and qualitative. In the weeks prior to the June elections, all polls, without exception, predicted spectacular results for this party. According to these forecasts, Iglesias's party would greatly profit from his coalition with the Communists, which would grant him access to a pool of over 900,000 votes. This contribution of new votes, coupled with the crisis in the Socialist Party (Partido Socialista Obrero Español, PSOE), with its electoral support at historic lows, pointed to an unprecedented success at the polls that would make Podemos the second largest political force in Spain. That is, it was thought that Podemos would not only win a substantial number of votes and seats but also become the dominant force of the left, overtaking the PSOE, the historical reference point and hegemonic party of the left since the beginning of the transition to democracy in the second half of the 1970s. In short, what was anticipated in the polls and expectations of the elections was that Spain was undergoing a process that would replace the PSOE with left-wing populists, as had happened in Greece with Passok and Syriza—with the end result being the achievement of the Spanish populists' strategic goal. In fact, because of the expectations generated by Podemos, the media in Spain acquired two new political terms. One was '*sorpasso*', an Italianism that referred to Podemos overtaking the PSOE in the elections. The other was 'passokisation', which was used to describe the grim future forecast under the Spanish socialists, like that suffered by the Greeks under Passok. However, neither *sorpasso* nor passokisation came to be. In June, Podemos suffered a resounding political failure and a deep disappointment from which it has still not recovered.

As one of the populist forces that has attracted more attention than others in this Europe of populisms, Podemos has proved that the assumption that these movements can only grow as if they were an unstoppable tide is wrong. The results speak for themselves. In the elections of 20 December 2015, Podemos obtained 5,189,333 votes (20.66 %) and the United Left 923,105 (3.67 %). On 26 June, the coalition of both parties obtained just 5,049,734 votes (21.1 %), in other words, 140,000 votes fewer than Podemos achieved when it stood alone (Government of Spain, Ministry of Home Affairs 2013).

¹ For an overview of the origin and development of Podemos, please see Alvarez Tardío (2015).

Does this mean that the time has come to write the story of the rise and fall of left-wing populism in Spain? Certainly not. At least not yet. But the recent Spanish lesson is that populism can be stopped and reversed.

Podemos, a populist party

‘Podemos’ is a political expression that articulates the thinking and strategic approaches developed by the radical left after its failure as embodied by the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of Soviet Communism.² At the core of the party Podemos is a group of political science, sociology and economics professors. Their scholarship is not particularly prestigious, but they have built on the theories of left-wing thinkers such as Žižek, Badiou and Laclau.³ They are also fascinated by the experiences of ‘Socialism of the twenty-first Century’, the ideological driver of Chavism in Venezuela and of the regimes of Correa in Ecuador and Evo Morales in Bolivia, and have been influenced in their political practice by Gramscian theories regarding the achievement of hegemony.

Podemos offers a practical example of what is meant by understanding populism not as having a particular ideological content but as a discursive logic. It is a logic of political construction that can be filled with different ideologies; in short, by understanding populism as a ‘political narrative’. Populism, from either the right or the left, rests on two pillars. On the one hand, it requires the construction of an enemy. On the other, it disparages representative democracy. Populism is basically illiberal.

Building an enemy is necessary in order to drag society into antagonism and establish an unbridgeable divide between good and bad, virtuous and wicked, and the wicked elites and the oppressed, by exploiting caste and the exploited ‘people’. The disparaging of representative democracy enables populism to counterpose an ‘authentic’ model of ‘direct’ or ‘participatory’ democracy, in which ‘the people’ make their own decisions at all times without delegating to anyone or to the representative system in which the interests of citizens are forgotten by the power circuits populated by the elites.

The rejection of representative democracy and what it means as a consensus, as a transaction and as a vehicle for political integration is actually a rejection of democracy *tout court*, of democracy as it has been carried out historically in the societies that enjoy it.

As an alternative, populism proposes a political entity called ‘the people without institutions’, deliberately ignoring the fact that the people is a plural reality and its political

² This is acknowledged by Iglesias, following Perry Anderson, when he states: ‘The only conceivable starting point today for a realistic left is to become aware of the historic defeat’ (Anderson 2015, 10).

³ An excellent study of left-wing thinking can be found in Scruton (2015). For the theoretical bases of left-wing populism, see Laclau (2005).

expression requires channels of representation, guarantees of the separation of powers, and protection of individual freedoms and of minorities.

Populism contradicts the central elements of democratic thinking and practice. Instead of the inclusive and integrating concept of the ‘people’ as a group of citizens free and equal before the law, populism imposes a divisive idea of people that fractures society into antagonistic factions doomed to clash: there are ‘the people’ (the oppressed, victims of the crisis) and the ‘non people’, represented by the elites, the caste and the oligarchy. As Laclau (2005) states, populism turns the ‘plebs’ into the ‘populus’. For that same reason, populism refuses to be attached to the right or to the left. All populists claim to lie beyond that division. In this sense, they seek to be post-ideological. Populism can be ‘progressive,’ ‘patriotic,’ ‘national’ or ‘social’, but all varieties insist on not belonging—only in terms of appearance—to the peaceful confrontation of ideological choices typical of democracies. Populists seek to be recognised as representatives of the whole. Therefore, it is also typical of populists to refuse to be regarded as political parties in the traditional way. Populists despise parties; they consider them to be mere instruments of domination by the elites. Not them; they are ‘popular movements’ generated from the bottom up, rooted in deeper social aspirations, without the bureaucratic and oligarchic distortions of traditional parties, which are top-down organisations. Their denominations often reflect this, circumventing any conventional ideological reference (Christian–Democrat, conservative, socialist, radical or popular) and seeking broader terms, as in the case of the name ‘Podemos’ (‘We can’).

When you renounce institutions, charismatic leaders emerge; this is also typical of populism. All theorists who have studied this phenomenon highlight the importance of this type of leadership to ensure the cohesion of the followers and a common identity for any particular form of populism. It could not be otherwise. This can be illustrated by the well-known categories of leadership proposed by Max Weber. If rational leadership—that which stems from the electoral procedures of representative democracy—is ignored, then charismatic leaders arise. This kind of leadership claims to have a special connection with the people, reflecting their real voice. As a referendum offers a binary choice—yes or no—it is the perfect tool to promote the division of society and it also serves as the plebiscite through which the leader establishes a direct relationship with the people.

Populism considers political action to be a zero-sum game between the ‘elites’ and the ‘people’. It is the recovery of conflict as the central concept of politics and, in this sense, the populist discourse owes much to the thesis of Schmitt (1982) on the friend–enemy relationship as the essential political relationship. Hence democracy, understood as mediation, as a process of deliberation and integration, and as a form of peaceful organisation of dissension, is radically rejected by the populism of Podemos. This rejection is not just a theoretical element. In the case of Podemos, it is the line of action that identifies it as a party.

Podemos, populism and the radical left

Unlike Syriza in Greece, Podemos follows up left-wing radicalism in economic and social matters with a political proposal for the constitutional break-up of Spain. It is worth noting that Syriza has not proposed amendments to the Greek constitution, the electoral system or the basic territorial organisation of the Greek state. On the contrary, Tsipras's left-wing radicals have left the roles of the Orthodox Church and the armed forces unchanged, when it could be expected that part of its radicalism would be directed against these two institutions, which seem far removed from what is understood by 'progressivism'. In Spain, in contrast, Podemos has made a point of rejecting the 1978 constitution and the national reconciliation agreements that allowed the peaceful transition to democracy. Its stated goal is to end the democratic regime implemented by Spain in 1978. This is based on the bizarre argument that the constitution—approved by a consensus of the vast majority of political forces, from the Communist Party to the Catalan nationalists, and with the endorsement of an overwhelming majority of the electorate—was the result of a reform and not a rupture, and that, consequently, Spanish democracy is a disguised continuation of Franco's dictatorship. The idea is delusional but nevertheless occupies a central place in the narrative of Podemos. To reinforce its argument against the Spanish constitutional system, Podemos has allied itself with nationalist forces in Catalonia, the Basque Country, Navarre and Valencia which openly raise the matter of the independence of these territories or the claim to exercise an alleged right to unilateral secession.

Podemos, therefore, is anti-system on both counts, and with this political *acquis* it has grown on the national political scene from a modest—but significant—result in the June 2014 European Parliament elections, in which it achieved 1,245,948 votes or 7.97 % of the vote. A year later, the results of the regional and local elections of 24 May 2015 granted considerable institutional power to Podemos. Indeed, after these elections, the PSOE decided that wherever a majority could be reached to govern city and town halls by adding its votes to those of the populists, it would reach agreements with Podemos to prevent the PP from ruling.

As a result of these widespread agreements between the socialists, Podemos and, where necessary, the nationalists, Podemos and its partners have gained significant positions, such as the city halls of Madrid and Barcelona, and hold important roles in regional governments and administrations. The fact that the PSOE has been the party most affected by the rise of Podemos and, at the same time has granted it so much power through these agreements is no small paradox. This is hard to understand when most European countries threatened by populism have developed a broad consensus among the established parties to prevent the former from reaching power. Such has been the case in France, in the similar logic of the 'grand coalition' in place in Germany and in Berlusconi's support of the Democratic Party before the rise of the Five Star Movement in Italy. In Spain, the PSOE has not only failed to contain the populist radical left but has in fact boosted it. Clearly a confrontation with the PP was more desirable than making a common commitment to face the damage inflicted on democratic institutions by populism.

The financial crisis and the rise of populism

It is undeniable that we must link the development of new populist movements in Europe to an environment of generalised crisis: a crisis of prosperity, a crisis in the sense of security, a crisis of identity and governance, and a crisis of the European project. Not all European countries have been affected by these different crises with the same intensity, but all are suffering from some manifestation of them. In some countries a perception of insecurity prevails, or there is the feeling that national identity is being threatened, either by the effects of globalisation or by the massive influx of migrants and refugees. In Spain, the dominant crisis is indeed one of prosperity and governance as a result of the long recession. The recession has led to high unemployment, which has affected a very large segment of the middle class and forced an internal devaluation, resulting in a significant loss of income for many Spaniards. In this climate, there is deep indignation among the population about the political and financial corruption that has emerged, aggravating the perceptions of citizens to the point that they consider corruption to be the result of a systemic deficiency in the political and economic model. Populism has sailed on the winds of crisis and indignation, successfully spreading its simple solutions to complex problems without having to worry about demonstrating that these solutions are indeed effective or even possible. Here, then, we must again insist that populism is a political narrative, not a programme for government. Therefore its proposals' disconnection with reality, practical unfeasibility, and departure from politics and real economics are not obstacles to its success but together form a utopian component typical of wishful thinking which only makes populism more attractive to certain sectors of the electorate and public opinion. For populists, reality is dispensable.

However, considering the crisis to be the only key to explaining the rise of populism would be oversimplifying the matter, and the rise of Podemos too. It is obvious that established or traditional parties have lost credibility and the ability to politically articulate the voices of European societies. Nor have they been able to reduce the generation gap that is dividing European politics to a greater extent even than ideological differences. Social media help populism to communicate its simplistic messages, in preference to the complex reasoning demanded by many of today's problems. Political loyalties, both on the right and on the left, have become weaker, and commitment to traditional parties is all but unknown among younger generations. 'Podemos' means 'we can', clearly echoing Obama's 'Yes we can', which is a brilliant slogan, and has been used throughout the political spectrum and adopted as a universal spell to solve any problem. Faced with this motto, which is full of emotion, it is hard to argue that it is not always true.

Unfortunately, in addition to the crisis, in other discussions populism has occupied dominant positions that have not been challenged. Many of these have been debates on uncomfortable issues, in which populists on both the right and the left have claimed to be the voice of the street, of the ordinary citizen and of the normal individual who suffers from the incompetence and selfishness of politicians, which are aggravated by the callous power of bureaucrats, usually from Brussels. Thus populists propose solutions that are unrealistic—what is left of Syriza's claims?—but that does not mean that they

are out of touch with reality. Rather, they offer an explanation to citizens who believe one cannot be found elsewhere for the reality in which they are living. And this is where we can agree that the success of populism is the correlative failure of the elites in the best sense of the word, that is, of those who, due to their positions in society, politics, the economy, finance, culture, media, academia and so on, should promote collective conversations about common problems and challenges to avoid populism filling the void with its demagogic monologue.

This ability to build a narrative for the crisis gave populism an air of invincibility that is largely to blame for Podemos's original successes. However, behind the recent poor performance of Podemos there are a number of issues. They were already there, yet it was unknown when they would have an effect. In the run-up to the June general election, Iglesias seemed to be having a 'Trump moment', even saying in a campaign rally that if he were to stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot a bystander, he would still not lose a single vote.

Podemos and the crisis of Spanish socialism

An analysis of Podemos's progress up to the last general election needs to take into account that this party emerged in a window of opportunity between two key moments. The first was the end of the socialist government (2004–11), whose authority had been deeply eroded due to its poor management of the economic downturn and the adjustment measures it was forced to adopt. The second was the arrival in government in 2011 of the PP, which focused on a thorough fiscal adjustment and structural reforms of the economy that boosted the populist discourse. It was against this backdrop that the 15 M movement emerged, occupying the Puerta del Sol in Madrid for weeks, and which Podemos usurped, profiting from the protest.

The development of Podemos cannot be understood without noting the political and electoral collapse suffered by the PSOE in the final period of its term in office, which caused it to clash with very large segments of the left. But if the social and economic situation of Spain and the socialist crisis offered unique chances for a new populist left-wing force, the leaders of Podemos did not hesitate to seize them. They managed to activate young people, regular abstainers and a large part of the left who were eager to punish the PSOE at the polls. Their radical and apparently motivational rhetoric reached segments of the middle class impoverished by the crisis and disappointed in their expectations of social promotion. Podemos was able to rightly boast that it had become a cross-cutting political force, capable of attracting voters from the centre-right and the left, as well as uncommitted voters. In order to do this, its commitment to the massive and skilful use of social networks and the new digital media, and a continuous presence on innovative television discussion programmes that reported remarkable audience ratings, was essential.⁴

⁴ 'People do not militate in parties but in media', Iglesias in Anderson (2015, 21).

It is not likely that this set of conditions in which Podemos has thrived will continue. The latest election results seem to point to this. As their structures, their leaders and their history have become known to the people, Podemos has experienced the effects of contact with real politics and public scrutiny. Research has revealed its financial and political links with Chavez's Venezuela and the fact that Iranian capital finances the television channel through which Podemos's leaders have been spreading their propaganda. The wrongdoings of some of the latter regarding university contracts or alleged consulting work for Latin American 'Socialism of the twenty-first Century' governments have damaged their reputations, further impacting the authenticity of their public-life regeneration messages, which were already under suspicion from the public. Moreover, in their goal to overtake the PSOE, Podemos adopted a strategy of ideological versatility that would one day cause Iglesias to express himself in the most extreme terms while on the next to adopt a more moderate stance as the heir of social democracy. This strategy has generated confusion among potential voters, including among those of the United Left, whom Iglesias has clearly failed to attract. Hence his coalition with the Communists was an agreement between leaders but failed to work for the voters. Furthermore, Iglesias's refusal to enable a government headed by the PSOE's Pedro Sánchez with the support of the new party Citizens (Ciudadanos) has retrospectively been seen as a mistake and left Podemos responsible for thwarting the formation of a government not led by the PP. In addition to this, Syriza's management of the Greek government has not set an encouraging precedent for populists as to the viability of their radical proposals. Therefore, Podemos had to face dual pressures in the recent election campaign. On the one hand, from the PP, which focused its efforts on warning about the damage that Podemos's growth, as well as its possible access to government, could cause; and on the other, from the PSOE, which blamed Iglesias for blocking an alternative to the PP by not supporting the former's agreement with Citizens. Both strategies worked, especially that of the PP, which managed to mobilise some of the voters who had previously abandoned it to vote against Podemos. Thus, the PP won the election, increasing their lead over the PSOE, while the socialists avoided the *sorpasso*.

The unprecedented crisis in the PSOE might provide fresh opportunities for electoral gains for Podemos at the expense of the socialists. The internal strife and the inability of the PSOE to cooperate with the PP on a bipartisan basis to produce a government are likely to take a heavy toll if a third general election in less than a year has to be called.

Conclusions

Even though Podemos maintained a very significant number of votes in the recent elections, it is now a party seriously affected by the failure to meet expectations. Its agreements with the nationalist left in Catalonia and Galicia have become very difficult to manage because Iglesias's authority as leader is no longer unquestioned by the new left. The discovery that radical left-wing populism is stagnant has triggered an internal debate that calls into question the core elements of its political project. Íñigo Errejón, Podemos's 'number two' and ideological driver, acknowledged this shortly after the last election: 'In order to govern, Podemos has to change, it has to mutate' (Manetto

2016). He added that the model of a populist party that Podemos had developed ‘is a model that no longer is the exception, the surprise . . . It is one capable of delivering certainties to a large part of the Spaniards who, even though they see us with sympathy, need more security and need us to demonstrate, in the meantime, our usefulness.’ ‘The street,’ Errejón stated, ‘not only demands epic narratives and demonstrations, the street asks for guarantees, public policies’ (Manetto 2016). That an intellectual disciple of Ernesto Laclau should express himself in these terms reveals the depth of the sense of crisis among the populists. Podemos is facing a very difficult task: nothing less than surviving itself.

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